



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

In the Shadow of Centenaries: Irish Artists go to War 1914-1918

Johnson, N. (2016). In the Shadow of Centenaries: Irish Artists go to War 1914-1918. In D. Drozdowski, S. De Nardi, & E. Waterton (Eds.), *Memory, Place and Identity: Commemoration and remembrance of war and conflict* (pp. 224-251). Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Memory-Place-and-Identity-Commemoration-and-remembrance-of-war-and-conflict/Drozdowski-De-Nardi-Waterton/p/book/9781138923218>

Published in:

Memory, Place and Identity: Commemoration and remembrance of war and conflict

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright 2016 Routledge. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Chapter 9

In the Shadow of Centenaries: Irish Artists go to War 1914-18

Nuala C Johnson

As we are in the throes of a decade of centenaries across Britain and Ireland remembering the hundredth anniversary of the First World War, as well the Easter Rising in 1916, the subsequent war of independence and partition of Ireland under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in 1921, the commemorative impulse is being enacted through a huge variety of memory-making practices and events (History Ireland 2014). From fresh academic studies to popular and official acts of remembrance this period has stimulated numerous re-examinations of the broader social, political and cultural impact of conflict in shaping European and extra-European identities, territories and geopolitical relationships. A new library of academic narratives is emerging providing enlivened insights into the causes of the war and the actions of different combatant states; a host of television documentaries on these events have been commissioned and broadcast; vast numbers of community-led peoples' history projects are being undertaken; and new museum exhibitions, dramas, movies and literary interpretations of the period are emerging (Evans 2014). Of course the primary difference between now and earlier acts of commemoration is that the Great War is now outside of living memory and our connections to it are more indirect, mediated and diverse. In Ireland [both north and south of the border] efforts to mark the centenary are intense and have become part of the narrative of reconciliation, inclusion and re-absorption of this period of history into popular memory especially in Northern Ireland (Grayson 2010). One

area of investigation that has received limited scholarly attention is the critical response of the visual arts to the war, and, in particular, the work of Irish-born painters who served as official war artists during the course of the conflict (Jeffrey 2014). Yet they have left us with a powerful visual archive of the war from both the perspective of the battlefield and the home front, and form part of an iconic record of these events as they happened in the second decade of the twentieth century. Moreover they also represent a coterie of artists whose relationship with Ireland was mediated through a complex set of alliances, allegiances, antipathies and identities in the liminal space that the island represented during that decade.

This chapter will consider two of the most significant Irish war artists, the Dublin-born Protestant William Orpen and the Belfast-born Catholic John Lavery. I will examine some of their war paintings and situate them in the context of a transforming set of Anglo-Irish relations that would characterize the decade from the First World War's beginning through to Irish independence. Combining a discussion of their biographical histories with their engagement with the Great War in this essay I will highlight the significance of the geographies of allegiance in conjugating personal and political identities. The First World War marked an important defining moment in relations between Ireland and Britain, not least in terms of the role of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the subsequent execution of its leaders, in situating the war in the Irish popular imagination and post-war memory (Jeffrey, 2000; Johnson 1999; 2007; Pennell 2012). Moreover war art would become one of the principal ways in which visual memories of the war would be translated to popular audiences. While photography and film were to play some role in providing an archive of imagery upon which the wider public would remember the war, it was painting that endured as the powerful medium for communicating descriptively, as well as symbolically

and ethically, responses to the war effort and connecting it with the cultural-political identities of the different combatant ‘nations’. In the case of Orpen and Lavery the channelling of their creative talent across a range of artistic subjects will illuminate how they related to the European conflict and the conflict in Ireland. While their war art had no particularly Irish content per se, in contrast to the work for instance of the Belfast-born William Conor, events in their homeland did not go unnoticed (Jeffrey 2014). More broadly, by focusing on the manner in which the arts have engaged with the war we can begin to echo the Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s claim that, “I can’t think of any case where poems changed the world, but what they do is they change people’s understanding of what’s going on in the world” (Heaney 2004, 3). It is the cognitive, affective and emotional registers that the arts in general and the visual arts in particular have to offer, in providing an interpretive apparatus for reacting to conflict, that makes them both enduring and relevant in analysing discourses of memory. While war memorials and the rituals of remembrance surrounding public commemorative activities have received widespread scholarly focus in drawing attention to the emotional geographies of war (Winter 1995; Johnson 2002; Kidd and Murdock 2004, Gordon and Osbourne 2004), war art has received rather less sustained research. But as Anderson (2013: 456) has reminded us in his recent overview of the literature on the geographies of affect and emotion we need to start thinking about “how images work performatively as devices that move bodies affectively”. This chapter seeks to begin this process by examining some key artistic works produced during the war that brought it pictorially and discursively into the lives of those, particularly on the home front, affected by the war, and entered into the long-term collective memories of British and Irish society in the calibration of ideas of nationhood and national identities.

Enlisting the Arts

Shortly after the war's outbreak, Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, was tasked with establishing the British War Propaganda Bureau, better known as Wellington House, the building in which it was headquartered in central London. Responding to the knowledge that Germany already had established a propaganda agency, the imperative to channel Britain's propaganda effort through an official department was realized and Liberal MP Charles Masterman headed up the bureau (Sanders 1975). Initially Wellington House devoted its time, in secrecy, to publishing and distributing pamphlets and books that promoted the government's view of the war. Enlisting some of the most significant writers of the day to support and work with the agency, including people such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry Newbolt, it produced over 1,100 pamphlets during the course of the war. These pamphlets supported Britain's role in the conflict and were directed at neutral states around the globe, particularly the United States (Taylor 1999). A pictorial section was established in the bureau in 1916 in order to visually capture some arresting imagery of the conflict as experienced at the front and at home. This visual propaganda included the production of lanternslides, postcards, calendars, photographs, bookmarks, and line drawings for worldwide distribution. The appetite for images, especially of the sites of battle, was intense especially among the editors of newspapers and illustrated publications, as well as for the department itself. Photographs, however, were not meeting this huge demand for a pictorial record of the conflict. By 1916 newspapers were exploring ways to procure new images for use in their publications and were offering monetary rewards to soldiers on the front to supply suitable line drawings. Moreover Masterman had learned in the summer of the same year that the renowned Scottish etcher, Muirhead Bone, had been called up for military service. He thought that the services of Bone might be better utilised through using his artistic talent to produce images for Wellington House than as an

infantry officer. Consequently Bone was recruited as the first official war artist. He was sent to France and by October had produced over 150 drawings of life on the front. On his return he was replaced by his brother-in-law, the portrait painter Francis Dodd, who completed more than thirty portraits of senior military figures.

Bone's drawings were published in ten monthly parts, beginning in 1916, and they proved very popular with the public as they were both affordable and accompanied by an explanatory essay (Malvern 2004). Collecting war memorabilia of a visual nature had begun. Moreover they confirmed Masterman's view that they would serve "as a novel adjunct to the programme of pictorial propaganda" (Gough 2010). As France and Germany had already recruited war artists to the battle front, the appointment of Muirhead Bone as Britain's first official war artist meant the government was following a wider trend among combatant states to maintain a visual record of the conflict (Hynes 1990). War art would also provide a permanent and long-standing visual evocation of the Great War in the imagination and memory of the public in the post-war period.

The move to establish an official war artist movement was also spurred on by the critical and popular acclaim that artist-soldier Eric Kennington's "The Kensington's at Laventie" reverse painting on glass received when he exhibited it in London in April 1916 (Weight 1986). *The Times* reviewer captured the essence of the painting's impact: "The picture convinces us that it is real life, but it is not at all like a photograph of the actual scene" (The Times 1916: 4). Such adjudication indicated the potential for art to provide a visual record of the war that both engaged the viewer with the material dimensions of war but also, significantly, with the emotional and moral landscape of the conflict. Painting was seen to have the potential to generate an affective response to the battlefield that could be

more compelling and transparent than photographic reproduction. As such the capacity of art to elicit popular support for the war was recognised at the official level. The decision to establish a new Department of Information, responsible for propaganda, and headed by the diplomat, historian and novelist, John Buchan, in February 1917, and drawing on the expertise of key figures in the London arts scene, reinforced the state's commitment to using the visual arts to represent the war and to re-deploy many artists already in the armed forces to serve their country as war artists.

Whilst the initial intention of the scheme was to create a pictorial record, the appointment of Lord Beaverbrook, William Maxwell Aiken, as Director of the new Ministry of Information in March 1918, (which replaced the Department of Information), brought the longer-term commemorative role of war art to the fore. Beaverbrook, with his business and newspaper experience, aimed to make the artistic representation of the war serve a wider purpose as a memorial legacy to the conflict for future generations to appreciate.

Beaverbrook brought this ambition with him from his experience of leading the Canadian War Memorials scheme. He sought to guide the Ministry towards a wider remit of deploying the visual arts as an act of commemoration the performance of which would have long-lasting effects on the public's imagination (Harries and Harriers 1983). War art would become an archive as well as a propaganda tool and thus become part and parcel of a wider memorialising effort. As Gough (2010: 31) explains "Arguably the greatest legacy of the war's art was the scheme itself: under Beaverbrook's tutelage the Ministry for Information protected and promoted emerging artists, brought intellectual coherence to a previously haphazard programme of commissioning". It was within this political and cultural context that many of the most significant names in British war art were to emerge. From John and Paul Nash to Stanley Spencer, artists produced a large collection of

exceptionally alluring and, at times, harrowing images of life on the battlefield. These works went on to become some of the most iconic visual images of the First World War and their longevity is confirmed by their recirculation and reproduction in books, films, websites and galleries devoted to interpreting the material and cultural context of the war and its afterlife. In particular, but not exclusively, this archive is housed at the Imperial War Museum in London (Malvern 2000; Kavanagh 1988; <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/about/art-design>). It is also within this official context that two Irish-born artists would make their contribution to the visual memory of the conflict but who would also be torn, to varying degrees, emotionally and ideologically, by the turbulent politics of Ireland in the second decade of the twentieth century. It is to the contribution of William Orpen and John Lavery to the canon of war art as memorial devices that I now wish to turn.

Capturing the Battle Front: William Orpen 1878-1931

The Dubliner William Orpen was born in 1878 into an affluent, Protestant family and lived his early years at the family home, Oriel House in Stillorgan, a well-to-do suburb of the city. Although his father was a successful solicitor, both his parents and his eldest brother Richard were accomplished amateur artists and Orpen's drawing talent was quickly recognized and nurtured by his parents. At the age of twelve he enrolled in the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, and although the art school specialized in industrial design, his painting skills were quickly recognized and he won many local awards. In 1897 he moved to the Slade School in London (1897-99) where he flourished and met many of the young promising artists of the day, including Augustus John. It was during his years at the Slade that Orpen developed his skills in portraiture which "may have derived from [t]his early impulse to commemorate and comment in paint upon those around him" (Upstone 2005:

10). He exhibited his early oil paintings at the New English Art Club in 1900 and they won much critical acclaim. While of small physical stature [approximately 5ft 2' tall] and harbouring a negative self-image of his appearance, Orpen completed numerous self-portraits during his lifetime, including one of himself preparing for work at the Western Front. He married Grace Knewstub, the daughter of a London art dealer, in 1901 but he would have numerous affairs for the remainder of his life both with society ladies whom he painted and the models he used in his studio.

As his reputation was expanding in Britain, Orpen spent time teaching at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art (between 1902 and 1914), at yearly or bi-yearly sessions. This brought him back to the home of his birth and into dialogue with friends and students with political allegiances different from his own. He was eager to transform the School from one specialising in industrial design to one focused on fine art. During these years Orpen encountered students of a nationalist persuasion, in particular Sean Keating, who became, for a time, his studio assistant in London and who discouraged Orpen from any involvement in the Great War (Turpin 1979). At the school he also became friends with a gifted Protestant art student Grace Gifford, whom he captured in the portrait entitled "Young Ireland". He encouraged her to attend the Slade School, which she did from 1907-08, but Gifford returned to Ireland after her training and supported the increasingly influential nationalist movement. She joined Sinn Féin, converted to Catholicism, and became an active promoter of the Irish language and the cultural revival. She got engaged to Joseph Plunkett, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising 1916, and married him in his prison cell on the eve of his execution that year (Upstone 2005). Nonetheless she maintained her friendship with Orpen, now domiciled in England, who would have been well aware of her political commitments. Although Foster claims that "Protestant families

like the Orpens lived at a distance from their Catholic neighbours, even those of the same class” (Foster 2005: 63) , it is nonetheless clear that well-to-do Protestants did come into close professional and personal contact with Catholics and with those who did not necessarily share their social or political status or views.

Orpen became a close friend of the collector and art dealer Hugh Lane and shared his ambition to create a museum of modern art in Ireland. At the same time he supported the labour leader Jim Larkin’s campaign to improve the employment conditions for the Irish working class. Having said that many of his paintings with Irish subjects reflected a critique of Irish piety, puritanism, the influence of the Catholic Church and the stifling bureaucratic structures inhibiting, in his view, progress towards modernity. His ambivalence towards the Ireland of his day is clearly expressed in his painting “The Holy Well” 1915 (Figure 9.1).

INSERT FIGURE 9.1 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.1: William Orpen ‘The Holy Well’ 1915. (Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland).

In the composition his friend Sean Keating is modelled as the quintessential Connemara man from the west of Ireland, overlooking, with an air of disgust, the naked, head-bowed figures below him approaching the well of absolution overseen by a priest. Similarly in the canvas “Sewing New Seed” 1913, Orpen’s attitude toward his homeland is expressed. The painting is conceived as an allegory of the stultifying effects of an Irish bureaucracy resistant to change or innovation in the arts in Ireland. Thus while Orpen’s pre-war

engagement with Ireland was complex and ambivalent, it is perhaps noteworthy that after 1915 he never visited the island again apart from one day-visit in 1918. Foster suggests that Orpen represented that class of Protestants who felt completely Irish while adhering to the union with Britain, but where “the “old Ireland” that accommodated the easy sense of belonging in both countries (and sustaining a privileged position in both), which Orpen grew up with, was long gone” (Foster 2005: 40). Of course Britain too was undergoing radical social and cultural upheaval on the eve of the war, and the conflict itself would presage both short- and long-term transformative effects on the political and ideological landscape of the country (Higonnet et al 1989; Fussell 2000; Winter 2003; Eksteins 2000).

By the war’s outbreak, Orpen was one of the most acclaimed society portrait painters in Britain but Upstone claims that “[t]he Great War marked a watershed in Orpen’s life; he was never the same after it” (Upstone 2005: 34). As a celebrated and popular artist, with significant connections to the British establishment, Orpen enlisted for the Army Service Corps in December 1915, where he was commissioned as Second Lieutenant and stationed at the Adjutant’s Office in Kensington Barracks. Sean Keating had quit Britain prior to conscription and advised Orpen to: “Come back with me to Ireland. This war may never end...I am going to Aran. There is endless painting to be done” (Keating 1937: n.p.). With the introduction of the war artists’ scheme, and through his personal contacts with senior statesmen, Orpen quickly secured himself a position as an official army painter and was posted to France. During this time he produced one of the largest corpus of paintings of any of the official war artists and subsequently donated all his war work to the state.

In April 1917 Orpen arrived in France and stayed until March 1918. Unlike other war artists who were permitted three weeks in France to prepare their work, Orpen was set no

time limitations, and unusually for a war artist, was promoted to the rank of Major. He was provided with a car and a chauffeur by the Department of Information and he self-funded the services of a batman and a private secretary. These special privileges reflected his position as one of the most respected living artists but also put him under pressure to produce a body of work that reflected this status. He was mainly stationed in towns behind the front lines although most of his early paintings consisted of portraits of generals, senior staff officers and celebrated airmen from the Air Corps. This first phase of his work in France included portraits of Sir Douglas Haig and General Trenchard, mirroring his commercial success as a portrait painter and providing material that appealed to those in charge of the visual propaganda machine. As well as painting in France he maintained a lively correspondence with family and friends at home and recorded his experiences in a memoir entitled *An Onlooker in France 1917-1919*. His first impressions of the Somme, arriving there only three weeks after the Germans had retreated behind the Hindenburg line, focused on the physical destruction of the landscape: "I shall never forget my first sight of the Somme battlefields. It was snowing fast, but the ground was not covered, and there was this endless waste of mud, holes and water. Nothing but mud, water, crosses and broken Tanks; miles and miles of it, horrible and terrible" (Orpen 1921: 16).

Orpen's stationing in France coincided with the Department of Information's discussion about what war artists were to paint in the field. First and foremost it was declared that war artists should document and record the war. As well as producing portraits of senior military personnel during the early months of his arrival in France Orpen also produced some line sketches and watercolours of individual soldiers on the front line during April and May 1917. "A Man in a Trench" 1917 represents one of these moving studies of a young soldier facing his potential mortality on the battlefield, and reflects a wider societal

concern that the war was destroying a whole generation of youths. While other war artists were producing more interpretive representations of the front through reconstructed landscapes of destruction, and with soldiers “going over the top” Arnold (1981: 322-23) observes, “Orpen concentrated on the direct and factual encounter”. When he returned to the Somme in the late summer of 1917 he was struck by how much the landscape had been radically transformed since his April experience. He recounted:

Never shall I forget my first sight of the Somme in summer-time. I had left it mud, nothing but water, shell-holes, and mud—the most gloomy, dreary abomination of desolation the mind could imagine; and now in the summer of 1917, no words could express the beauty of it. The dreary, dismal mud was baked white and pure—dazzling white. White daisies, red poppies and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles. The sky a pure dark blue, and the whole air, up to a height of about forty feet, thick with white butterflies; your clothes were covered with butterflies. It was like an enchanted land; but in the face of fairies there were thousands of little white crosses, marked “Unknown British Soldier” for the most part (Orpen 1921:31).

This transmogrified landscape drove Orpen to transform his approach to representing the battle zone. He altered his palette of colours to include mainly pastel shades: white, pea greens, soft lavenders and mauves, and clear blues for depicting the skies. This change of mood in his work enabled him to express pictorially nature’s capacity to rejuvenate amid a landscape of human destruction. As Gough (2010: 173) observes, “an unusually piercing, acute and intense light that deflected off the seared white chalk casting bizarre shadows and extreme shifts in tone and colour. To an artist accustomed to the dusky opulence of

cavernous Edwardian drawing rooms it came as a revelation”. Dispensing with half tones and deploying shadowing and foreshortening to create effect, Orpen evoked this summer scene. “A Dead German’s Trench” 1917 (Figure 9.2) gives a flavour of the theatricality produced by this technique as the two long-dead German soldiers appear as if lit with artificial light beams, occupying the base of the trench and conveying the stark demarcation of a world divided by life and death.

INSERT FIGURE 9.2 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.2: William Orpen ‘Dead Germans in a Trench’ 1918. © IWM (Art.IWM ART 2955)

During this period Orpen produced at least eighteen oil paintings of the summer Somme landscape and although “[t]he evidence of death was all around him... so was the evidence of life. Skulls and flowers were side by side....Death is even more inscrutable in the face of beauty” (Arnold 1981: 320). The tension between the aesthetics of nature and the ugliness of warfare characterized much of his work in this period.

As the war wore on, 125 of his war works were exhibited at Agnew’s gallery in London in May 1918, to considerable popular acclaim but mixed critical response. Some commentators regarded them as lacking sufficient sentiment, drama or action. It was during this exhibition that Orpen offered to donate all his war paintings, and any future ones he completed, to the government under the proviso that they be kept as a single collection. While the exhibition travelled to Manchester and the USA, any thoughts of showing the paintings in Dublin’s National Gallery were shelved amidst fears about how

such war paintings might be received in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. This fear was exacerbated by the artist's close personal friendship with Colonel Lee who oversaw the execution of the rebellion's leaders in Dublin (Dark and Konody 1931; Arnold 1981).

Suffering from continual ill health, possibly from syphilis, and becoming increasingly depressed by the war, Orpen returned to France in July 1918. During this sojourn Orpen's work moved from the realism of his earlier paintings towards a more symbolic or allegorical approach to the conflict. In "The Mad Woman of Douai" 1918 (Figure 9.3), perhaps one of his most disturbing war paintings, he evokes the destructive impulse on the civilian as well as the military population ushered in by the war.

INSERT FIGURE 9.3 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.3: William Orpen 'The Mad Woman of Douai' 1918. © IWM (Art. IWM ART 4671)

In the midst of a devastated landscape sits a woman, seemingly having lost her reason, as wearied soldiers and local villagers appear either incapacitated or disinclined to comfort her. The image represents the aftermath of a rape, a metaphor for German brutality that had circulated throughout the war. The violation, however, resides not solely in the body of the woman herself but also on the ruined countryside enveloping the group. The war-weary soldiers occupying the space display no appetite for sympathizing with the woman's experience as they too, perhaps, have endured the ravaging of their bodies and minds over the course of four years of conflict. The psychological as well as the corporeal cost of war, depicted in this painting, represents as increasingly wide recognition that the war's effects

were mental as well as physical (Bourke 1996; Meyer 2012; Leese 2014; Zuckerman 2004). The affective response to the war was not only felt by the grieving families of dead soldiers but the emotional toll permeated civil society in wider ways and infiltrated the heads of soldiers who managed to survive the conflict. War art, as well as creative writing, attempted to capture some of these effects, in word and image, and as Paul Fussell (1975) has argued fostered a modernist irony in young men “revealing exactly how spurious were their visions of heroism, and—by extension—history’s images of heroism” (Gilbert 1987: 201). The high incidence of shell-shock, estimated as 40% of casualties in the war zones by 1916, challenged earlier interpretations of male hysteria. As Showalter (1987: 63) explains “This parade of emotionally incapacitated men was in itself a shocking contrast to the heroic visions and masculinist fantasies that had preceded it in the British Victorian imagination”. Painting, as well as poetry, memoir and novel, subverted these traditional visions and presented uncomfortable but resonating engagements with the effects of modern, mechanised warfare to popular audiences.

After the war’s end Orpen remained in Paris, commissioned to document the peace negotiations on canvas, and culminating in the controversial memorializing painting “To the Unknown British Soldier in France” 1921-28. Initially he methodically painted the principal politicians and servicemen involved in the conference, a total of thirty-six figures, gathered in the luxurious surroundings of the Hall of Peace. He then, without notifying the War Museum, erased them all and replaced them with a coffin draped in the Union Jack and guarded by two semi-nude soldiers and cherubs in the air above. This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1923. Ridiculed by the establishment and the conservative press, the painting was hailed a triumph by the public who voted it the picture of the year. The left-wing press concurred with such a view, with the *Daily Herald*

claiming it “a magnificent allegorical tribute to the men who really won the war” (quoted in Gough 2010: 196). The Trustees of the Imperial War Museum rejected it though for inclusion in its collection of war art, and this prompted the *Liverpool Echo* to opine “Orpen declines to paint the floors of hells with the colours of paradise, to pander to the pompous heroics of the red tab brigade” (quoted in Gough 2010: 197). The painting represented an embodiment of the heroism of the soldier in the face of a futile conflict and seemed to touch a nerve among popular English audiences in the immediate post-war period where the memory of the conflict was still fresh. In 1928, however, to mark the death of his friend Earl Haig Orpen erased the soldiers, the cherubs and the floral tributes and left only the coffin, the gilded marble façade framing it and the beam of light leading to the cross in the painting’s background. It was accepted by the Imperial War Museum. After the war Orpen resumed his successful career as a portrait painter with studios in London and Paris, earning a large fortune from his commissions. However with a chaotic personal life, heavy drinking and continual bouts of ill-health and depression, Orpen’s final years were spent often estranged from his family and friends, and he died on 1931 and was buried in Putney Vale cemetery. A hugely successful artist during his lifetime, his work entered relatively obscurity in the aftermath of his death, only to be resurrected by retrospective exhibitions from the 1970s onwards including two staged in the National Gallery of Ireland in 1978 and 2005 (Arnold 1981). William Orpen initially confronted life on the Western Front with some enthusiasm and with the imprimatur of key establishment figures. His talent as a portrait painter at home was mirrored in his early paintings of important military leaders. As the war progressed, however, his approach became darker, as he attempted to capture the landscape at the front as experienced by ordinary soldiers. While his war work did not achieve the critical acclaim of some other official artists, the impact of the conflict on his

painting and on his health more generally, would have enduring effects that proved more potent than any patriotic affiliations to the place of his birth.

Stuck on the Home Front: John Lavery 1856-1941

In contrast to William Orpen, John Lavery, the son of a struggling wine and spirit merchant, was born in 1856 in North Queen Street, Belfast and baptised in the St Patrick's Catholic Church, Donegall Street. Three years later his father Henry Lavery, on a voyage on board the American vessel the *Pomona*, was drowned when it struck a sandbank off the coast of Wexford. His wife Mary Donnelly died shortly afterwards from the shock of her husband's death, leaving Lavery and his brother and sister orphans. He was sent to live with his uncle on his farm near Moira, Co Down before moving, at age 10, to more prosperous relatives in Saltcoats Ayrshire. He was unhappy there though and ran away to Glasgow before being returned to his uncle's farm in Moira. When he was 15 years old he departed again for Glasgow with £5 in his pocket, but having experienced some of the rougher sides of Glasgow life he initially moved back with his relatives in Ayrshire.

His creative talents began with a three-year apprenticeship at J.B. McNair's photographic studio in Glasgow where he developed his drawing skills as he touched up negatives and colour prints. In 1874 he started taking classes at the Haldane Academy of Arts in Glasgow, with the aim of becoming a portrait artist. Over the next few years he continued to work with photographers and when a studio he was renting was gutted by fire, he received £300 from the insurance company. This prompted him to move to London where he enrolled in 1879 in the Heatherley School of Art before moving to Paris to study at the Académie Julian (Snoddy 2010). It was in Paris that some of his early paintings were first exhibited and where he met James McNeill Whistler, before returning to Glasgow and

becoming associated with the emerging Glasgow School of artists, noted in particular for cultivating impressionist and post-impressionist techniques (Bilcliffe 2009). In a stroke of good fortune he obtained a prestige commission in 1888 to record Queen Victoria's visit to the International Exhibition in the city. The painting was deemed a success and provided the platform for him becoming a significant society painter. Following the completion of the commission he travelled with friends to Morocco and in 1889 he married Kathleen McDermott, a local flower-seller. They had one child, Eileen, but his wife died of tuberculosis shortly afterwards in 1891.

In the years following Lavery travelled extensively across Europe and his work was gaining wider recognition among continental artists and galleries. Moreover his reputation as an artist was also gaining traction in Britain and Ireland with his election to the Royal Scottish Academy in 1896 and the Royal Hibernian Society a decade later. With his increased public recognition as an artist he moved to 5 Cromwell Place, Kensington in 1896, and this address would remain significant as his home and studio for some of the most well-known works he produced over the remainder of his life (Snoddy 2010).

Having initially met Hazel Martyn Trudeau – an American artist, socialite and heiress of Irish descent – in 1903, Lavery and she married in 1909 in a union that would see her become the most significant model/muse of his artistic career. She appears in over four hundred of his paintings both as the subject of portraits but also as the model for other works. “The Artist's Studio” 1910-13, produced just before the war, features Hazel, Eileen [John's daughter from his first marriage] and Alice [his stepdaughter], and, like some of Orpen's work, exhibits the continued influence of Velazquez's “Las Meninas” in early twentieth century art. The painting also underlines the significance of Hazel Lavery to his

career, and despite a tempestuous marriage, she would continue to exert a long-term influence on his work (McCoole 1996). Outside the Kensington studio he undertook trips to Tangier and other North African locations between 1910-14 and painted the North African landscape and its people. Kenneth McConkey (2010: 117) claims that through such trips “Colourfully clad Moors, Berbers and Nubians became the painter’s antidote to society ladies, who habitually arrived in the studio [in London] dressed in black and grey”. Tours to Venice and Wengen where he also painted *en plein air* provided an additional escape from the routine of portraiture that occupied much of his time at his London studio.

In 1913 the Laverys visited Killarney House, in Co Kerry, beside the lakes, mainly to paint a portrait of Lady Dorothy Browne. But it was here that John Lavery initially started to develop his idea for his triptych “The Madonna of the Lakes” 1917 featuring Hazel as the Madonna, Alice as a young St Patrick and Eileen as St Brigid. A backdrop of the Killarney mountain landscape and its lakes connected the three sections of the composition. Edwin Lutyens, a friend of Lavery’s, was commissioned to design the frame using Celtic spiral motifs. When exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1919 it was hailed as “an enormous advance on anything to be seen in modern religious painting” (quoted in McConkey: 130). Lavery donated it to the church in Belfast where he was baptised and it consolidated his wife’s iconic status in his work. The painting’s execution during the years between the start of the Great War and the Easter Rising illustrates the complex loyalties the family had between his success as well-respected portrait painter in London and their strong affiliations to Ireland and its nationalist movement. Indeed the Laverys spent increasing time in Ireland and at the outbreak of the war in 1914 they were visiting Dublin and Wicklow. Hazel Lavery’s Galway ancestry, alongside her husband’s Catholic Belfast roots, prompted him “to ponder more deeply the question of national allegiance”

(McConkey: 124). Moreover their social circle in Dublin brought him into direct contact with many of the major figures spearheading the agitation for Home Rule.

However on their return to London in the summer of 1914 the impact of the war was immediately apparent to them. Lavery set about depicting the war's destructive force in his early painting "The First Wounded, London Hospital" 1914 (Figure 9.4) (Park and Park 2011).

INSERT FIGURE 9.4 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.4: John Lavery 'The First Wounded, London Hospital 1914'. (Photograph courtesy of the Dundee City Council, Dundee's Art Galleries and Museums).

The picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy and won critical and popular acclaim, from a public increasingly hungry to see the effects the war at home. The composition, set in a London military hospital, appealed to a large audience because it conveyed the immediate wounds of war and domesticated the conflict for those at some distance from the sites of battle. Moreover it also provided an insight into the medical and nursing care provided to these early casualties of the war. Unlike Orpen, Lavery's chronicling of the Great War was to be from the perspective of the Home Front (Cooksley 2006; Grayzel 2002). He joined the Artists' Rifles in 1915 but because of his age and health was advised by his doctor that his contribution to the army should reside in visually depicting the conflict rather than fighting in it. Initially he continued with his portrait commissions, particularly of political leaders including Winston Churchill, John Redmond [leader of the

Irish Parliamentary Party] and Edward Carson [leader of Ulster Unionists]. His immediate attitude to the Easter Rising in April 1916 is difficult to discern, but it is known that he supported the idea of introducing conscription to Ireland. At the behest of the Lord Chief Justice [Sir Charles Darling], he also recorded the Court of Appeal's hearing for Roger Casement's conviction for high treason and sentencing to death in "The Court of Appeal" 1916-18.

While Lavery was anxious to travel independently to the Front to witness the war first-hand, under military restrictions there was no possibility of him securing permission. While he spent some time in early 1917 in St Jean de Luz and painted its harbour, he was never to get close to the action at the front lines and consequently his war paintings were to be evoke conditions on the home front. In July 1917 twenty-one German Gotha biplanes carried out an aerial bombardment of London, which was clearly visible from Lavery's Cromwell Place studio. He captured the scene on canvas depicting Hazel, with her back to the viewer, kneeling before a statue of the Madonna as the sky outside erupted in the aerial battle between German bombers and British defence forces ("Daylight Raid from my Studio Window" 1917). Depicting this attack on the capital by combining the domesticity of their interior world of home and studio, with the aerial war being conducted outside their window conveyed to the public that the conflict was not just conducted in spaces afar across the English Channel but that it was intimately bound up with the lives of those who remained at home (Chapman 2014).

Lavery was increasingly keen to play an official role in representing the war and with the establishment of the new Department of Information under the stewardship of John Buchan, his opportunity arose to become an official war artist. His desire followed the

wider motivation of artists "...to witness, interpret and leave some form of personal testimony was a powerful incentive to those who needed to come to terms with their violent muse" (Gough 2010: 32). However as Lavery now was in his early 60s he was restricted to Home Front duty and was issued with a Special Joint Naval and Military Permit. These permits were in reality letters of introduction and did not necessarily give artists freedom to depict any aspect of life on the home front that they liked. He initially went to Scotland to draw the fleet at anchor in the Firth of Forth and despite some negotiations with local commanders he made several paintings including "The Forth Bridge 1917". The image depicts the bridge itself, kite balloons and the grand fleet at some distance in the background. While much of the work of the official war artists captured life of the infantry soldier at the front, this image highlighted the significant role of the navy in the prosecution of this conflict. On his way to Edinburgh he stopped at Newcastle-upon-Tyne and visited the munitions factories at Elswick. Lavery decided to portray this interior space providing a pictorial representation of the industrial scale of production underpinning the industrial speed of killing along the battlefronts. In "Munitions, Newcastle, 1917" (Figure 9.5), the size of the machinery and weaponry of war dwarfs the workforce responsible for their production.

INSERT FIGURE 9.5 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.5: John Lavery 'Munitions, Newcastle, 1917'. © IWM (Art.IWM ART 1271)

The high ceilings, the vast girders and the armaments themselves convey a sense of the technological and human effort invested to provide the infrastructure of what would later be described as the first modern war. The painting also highlights the transformation in

gender roles that the war precipitated as women became centrally involved in the manufacture of weapons (Ouditt 1994; Woollacott 1994).

In Southampton, later in 1917, Lavery provided a bird's eye view of soldiers embarking on ships heading for the front lines – “Troops embarking at Southampton for the Western Front 1917”. The size of the ship and the cranes surrounding it renders diminutive the long lines of smartly uniformed soldiers preparing to board the vessel. The hues of brown, khaki and grey convey something of the colour of the landscape that would emerge in the paintings of artists working at the front. Lavery was dispatched north again, including a visit to the Orkneys, where he could experience first-hand the severity of the winter weather conditions under which the Royal Navy was operating. In a visit to East Fortune, in East Lothian, Lavery conducted the preparatory work for “A Convoy, North Sea, 1918. From N.S. 7” (Figure 9.6).

INSERT FIGURE 9.6 NEAR HERE

Figure 9.6: John Lavery ‘A Convoy, North Sea, 1918. From N.S. 7’. © IWM (Art.IWM ART 1257)

Rather than imagining the scene from land, Lavery, now 62 years old, sketched the scene from an airship and evoked the danger faced by gunners leaning out over the sea in search of U-boats. Moreover the scene indicates the geopolitical significance of keeping the North Sea open for military and commercial convoys. His final commission, as the war ended in 1918, was to provide the Imperial War Museum with a series of paintings for their

Women's Work collection, including the "The Cemetery, Etapes" 1919. Lavery's contribution to the corpus of war art earned him a knighthood.

In the years after the war Lavery's connections to Ireland deepened as he produced numerous paintings of politicians and churchmen, on both sides of the political divide. The family established a strong friendship with the nationalist leader Michael Collins, and they provided their London house as a retreat for the Irish delegation that arrived in England to negotiate the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. After independence Lavery continued his close connections with Ireland. He completed several portraits of Irish Free State politicians, and donated many of his works to the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Dublin and the Belfast Museum. Moreover Hazel Lavery served as model for her husband's commission to produce an allegorical image of Ireland, which was subsequently used on Irish banknotes from 1928-75, and became the watermark on Euro notes introduced in 2002. Lavery died in 1941 in Kilkenny where he was guest of his stepdaughter and was buried beside his wife in Putney Vale cemetery.

Afterlife: In the Shadow of Centenaries

The contribution of two Irish painters to immortalizing the war effort on canvas is beginning to attract more attention in discussions of Ireland's role in the Great War. The two men shared certain similarities, most notably, enjoying successful careers in England, as portrait artists, with strong connections with the social elite of the day. Both were also keen to play a role in the war and the official war artists' scheme afforded them such an opportunity. Their difference in age, however, coupled with Orpen's significant contacts with the political establishment, meant that he would paint at the war front while Lavery would be confined to depicting the war's impact at home. They both produced portfolios of

work that contained many arresting images of the human and physical costs of war, and each, in their own way, spoke to the emotional and moral questions raised by four years of conflict. They were both rewarded with knighthoods. That said, the Dubliner Orpen, who had many personal connections with Irish nationalists, over time, distanced himself from the political turmoil that enveloped Ireland during the war years. His retreat in the post-war years from family and friends, both in England and Ireland, perhaps is emblematic of the significant long-term impact serving as a war artist on the front had on his psychological and physical wellbeing. By contrast, the Belfast man Lavery, maintained a longer and deeper relationship with the island of his birth, and whilst his ultimate political views remain below the surface, the legacy of his artistic output indicates a highly nuanced set of geographies of allegiance. It is precisely the complexity of these loyalties, mirrored in his paintings, that renders his work, emblematic of the entangled topologies of identity and memory, prevalent on these islands from the First World War to the present. Both of these artists performed the war through visual rather than verbal media. The communication of life in the trenches and at home, under wartime conditions, was translated through the vocabulary of the painterly image, evoking landscapes of death and domesticity that reflected both their personal experience and the wider geographies of identity each held. The emotional registers that the Great War provoked for each painter speaks to the deeper complexities of their ideological and affective commitments to Ireland, before, during and after the First World War.

References

- Anderson, B. 2013. Affect and emotion. In N. C. Johnson, Schein, R. H. and Winders, J. (eds.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 452-464.
- Arnold, B. 1981. *Orpen: Mirror of an Age*. London: Jonathan Cape.

- Billecliffe, R. 2009. *The Glasgow Boys*. London: Frances Lincoln.
- Bourke, J. 1996. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chapman, T. 2014. *IWM: The First World War on the Home Front*, London: Andre Deutsch.
- Cooke, S. and Jenkins, L. 2001. Discourses of regeneration in early twentieth-century Britain: From Bedlam to the Imperial War Museum. *Area* 33: 382-390.
- Cooksley, P. 2006. *The Home Front: Civil Life in World War One*. London: The History Press.
- Dark, S. and Konody, P. G. 1932. *Sir William Orpen: Artist and Man*. London: Seeley Service.
- Eksteins, M. 2000. *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Evans, R. J. W. 2014. The greatest catastrophe the world has seen. *New York Review of Books*, February 6.
- Foster, R. 2005. Orpen and the New Ireland. In R. Upstone (ed.) *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death*. London: Philip Wilson, 63-155.
- Foster, R. 2005. 'Old Ireland and Himself': William Orpen and the conflicts of Irish identity. *Estudios Irlandeses* 1: 39-50.
- Fussell, P. 2000. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Gilbert, S. 1987. Soldier's heart: Literary men, literary women, and the Great War. In M. Higonnet, Jenson, J., Michel, S. and Collins Weitz, M. 1989 (eds.) *Behind the Lines: Gender and Two World Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 197-226.
- Gordon, D. and Osborne, B. 2004. Constructing national identity in Canada's capital, 1900-2000: Confederation Square and the National War Memorial. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30: 618-642.
- Gough, P. 2010. *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War*. Bristol: Sansom and Co.
- Grayson, R. 2010. The place of the First World War in contemporary Irish republicanism in Northern Ireland. *Irish Political Studies* 3: 325-345.
- Grayzel, S. 2002. *Women and the First World War*. London: Routledge.
- Heaney, S. 2004. *This Week*, 15 April.

- Higonnet, M., Jenson, J., Michel, S. and Collins Weitz, M. 1989 (eds.) *Behind the Lines: Gender and Two World Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hynes, S. 1990. *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head.
- Imperial War Museums' Art Collection available at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/about/art-design>.
- Jeffrey, K. 2014. William Conor's People's War: A Consideration of the Most 'Irish' of Ireland's First World War Painters. *History Ireland* 22: 42-44.
- Jeffrey, K. 2000. *Ireland and the Great War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, N. C. 2007. *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, N. C. 2002. Mapping monuments: The shaping of public space and cultural identities. *Journal of Visual Communication* 1 (3): 293-298.
- Johnson, N. C. 1999. The spectacle of memory: Ireland's remembrance of the Great War 1919. *Journal of Historical Geography* 25: 36-56.
- Kavanagh, G. 1988. Museum as Memorial: the Origins of the Imperial War Museum. *Journal of Contemporary History* 23: 77-97.
- Keating, S. 1937. William Orpen: A Tribute. *Ireland Today*: np.
- Kidd, W. and Murdoch, B. 2004 (eds.) *Memory and Memorials: the Commemorative Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Leese, P. 2014. *Shell shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Malvern, S. 2000. War, memory and museums: Art and artifact in the Imperial War Museum. *History Workshop Journal* 49: 177-203
- Malvern, S. 2004. *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- McCoole, S. 1996. *Hazel, a Life of Lady Lavery*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- McConkey, K. 2010. *Sir John Lavery: a Painter and his World*. Edinburgh: Atelier [second revised edition].
- Meyer, J. 2012. *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Orpen, W. 1921. *An Onlooker in France 1917-1919*. Fairford, Gloucestershire: Echo Library 2010 edition. Originally published London: Williams and Norgate 1921.

- Ouditt, S. 1994. *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*. London: Routledge.
- Park, M. P. and Park, R. H. R. 2011. Art in wartime: The First Wounded, London Hospital, August 1914. *Medical Humanities* 37: 23-26.
- Pennell, C. 2012. *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sanders, M. L. 1975. Wellington House and British Propaganda During the First World War. *The Historical Journal* 18: 119-146.
- Showalter, E. 1987. Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties. In M. Higonnet, Jenson J., Michel S and Collins Weitz, M. 1989 (eds.) *Behind the Lines: Gender and Two World Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 61-69.
- Special Issue: 2014. Ireland and WWI. *History Ireland* 22: 3-66.
- Snoddy, T. 2010. "Sir John Lavery". *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Accessed online <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a4701>.
- Taylor, P. M. 1999. *British Propaganda in the 20th Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- The Times*, May 20, 1916.
- Turpin, J. 1979. William Orpen as student and teacher. *Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review* 68: 173-192.
- Upstone, R. 2005. Age and beauty in an age of extremes. In R. Upstone (ed.) *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death*. London: Philip Wilson, 7-52.
- Upstone, R. 2005 (ed.) *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death*. London: Philip Wilson.
- Weight, A. 1986. The Kensingtons at Laventie: A twentieth century icon. *Imperial War Museum Review*: 14-18.
- Winter, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winter, J. 2003. *The Great War and the British People*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woollacott A 1994. *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Zuckerman, L. 2004. *The Rape of Belgium: the Untold Story of World War I*. New York: New York University Press.